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# Musical Instruments in Early English Drama: Tudor Plays

## Mary Remnant

This essay is intended to supplement the present writer's contribution to the book *Material Culture and Medieval Drama* in the Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series.<sup>1</sup> That article dealt with the musical instruments used in religious drama, morality plays, court entertainments, and royal entries. Now, in the present essay, attention is given to the use of instruments in certain aspects of daily life, as shown in the following early Tudor plays: Henry Medwall, *Fulgens and Lucrece* (c.1497); John Rastall, *The Interlude of the Four Elements* (1517–18); John Heywood, *The Play of the Wether* (c.1528); John Redford, *Wyt and Science* (1531–47); John Bale, *Kyng Johan* (by 1539; revised ?1558–59); Nicholas Udall, *Royster Doyster* (1545–52); Mr. S., Master of Arts, *Gammer Gurtons Nedle* (c.1553); Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton, *Gorbodoc* (1562); and Thomas Preston, *Cambises* (1558–69).<sup>2</sup>

Instruments of church music are referred to, not only in a straightforward way as in *The Play of the Wether* where Wind Miller says, “In every chyrch where Goddys servyce is / The organs beare brunt of halfe the quere iwis” (596–97), but also in both serious and farcical ways in the satirical *King Johan*. Here the Pope excommunicates the King with the sound of a bell:

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<sup>1</sup> *Material Culture and Medieval Drama*, ed. Clifford Davidson, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Ser. 25 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), 141–94.

<sup>2</sup> Editions cited are as follows: Medwall, *Fulgens and Lucrece*, ed. Alan H. Nelson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1979); *Interlude of the Four Elements*, ed. Richard Axton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1979); Heywood, *The Plays*, ed. Peter Happé (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991); Redford, *Wyt and Science*, in *Medieval Drama*, ed. David Bevington (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975); Bale, *The Complete Plays*, ed. Peter Happé (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985); Udall, *Roister Doister*, ed. W. W. Greg, Malone Society Reprints (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935); *Gammer Gurtons Nedle*, *Gorbodoc*, and *Cambises*, in *Tudor Plays*, ed. Edmund Creeth (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966). References are to act numbers (if available) and line numbers.

For as moch as Kyng Johan doth Holy Church so handle,  
Here I do curse hym with crosse, boke, bell, and candle.

. . . .

I take hym from Crist, and after the sownd of this bell,  
Both body and sowle I geve hym to the devyll of hell. (1034–35, 1042–43)

The King later says to Private Welth:

Take to ye yowr traysh, yowr ryngyng, syngyng, and pypyng,  
So that we may have the scryptures openyng. (1392–93)

The “pypyng” of the organ is also referred to by Sedicyon (who elsewhere mentions an unlikely relic of “a pece of Davyds harpe stryng” [1218]), with “He hath pipys and belles, with kyrye, kyrye, kyrye” (2564), suggesting that the organ and bells take part in the *Kyrie eleyson*. Earlier, when King Johan had said, “Agaynst Holy Churche I wyll nomore speake or loke” (1972), Sedicyon had commanded:

Go, open the churche dores, and lete the belles be ronge,  
And through out the realme see that *Te Deum* be songe. (1973–74)

The sounds of war appear in the same play when the Cardynall says:  
Blow owt yowre tromppettes, and sett forth manfully:  
The frenche kyng Phelype by sea doth hether apply  
With the powre of Fraunce to subdew this herytyke. (1604–06)

And in act 4, scene 7, of *Royster Doyster* Matthew Merygreeke imitates the sound of a drum when calling upon the aid of St. George before battle: “Now saint Geroge to borow, Drum dubbe a dubbe afore” (1689). In an earlier scene in the same play, a remarkable imitation of several instruments appears in Dobinet Doughtie’s speech:

I trowe neuer was any creature liuyng,  
With euery woman is he in some loues pange,

Then vp to our lute at midnight, twangledome twang,  
 Then twang with our sonets, and twang with our dumps,  
 And heyhough from our heart, as heauie as lead lumpes:  
 Then to our recorder with toodleloodle poope  
 As the howlet out of an yuie bushe should hoope.  
 Anon to our gitterne, thrumpledum thumpledum, thrum,  
 Trumpledum, thrumpledum, thrumpledum, thrumpledum, thrum. (581–89)

Meanwhile, Mage Mumble-crust had called for dance music with “Pipe vp a mery note,/ Let me heare it playde, I will foote it for a grote” (518–19).

When a pipe was played for dancing, it was frequently combined with a tabor, and the combination was covered by the term *tabret* or *taberet*. In France this was known as *tamborim* or *tambourin*, which was presumably the same as the Flemish *tamboryne* given below. In *Fulgens and Lucrece* Cornelius says to the Tudor youth known only as B:

Go sone and bidde them come thens anone,  
 And cause the mynystrellis to come in beffore. (2.385–86)

B goes out and returns with minstrels and mummers, and says:

Mary, as for one of them, his lippe is sore —  
 I trowe he may not pype, he is so syke.  
 Spele up tamboryne, ik bide owe frelike.

*Et deinde corisabunt.* (2.387–89 + *s.d.*)

*The Interlude of the Four Elements* is one of the first places where the *kit* is mentioned in connection with dancing. (At this time the term *kit* was likely to have been synonymous with the *rebec*.) Humanyte says, “This daunce wold do mych better yet / Yf we had a kyt or taberet” (1349–50). This coincides with a reference in *Northumberland Household Book* (begun in 1512), which says:

ITEM My Lorde usith and accustomyth to gyf yerly when his Lordschipp is at home to his Minstrailles that be daly in his Household as his Tabret: Lute and Rebek upon New Yeres-Day in the mornynge when they doo play at my Lordis Chambre doure. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Around the same time (1520–24) the well-known Minstrels’ pillar in St. Mary’s Church, Beverley (Yorkshire) shows a group of liveried musicians playing a pipe-and-tabor, rebec, lute (?), and shawm. Unfortunately, they are badly damaged and the central figure has no visible instrument at all (fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Beverley, St. Mary, “Minstrels’ Pillar.” Wikimedia Commons.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Percy, *Regulations and Establishment of Henry Algernon Percy, 5th Earl of Northumberland* (1770; reprint, London, 1827), 342.

For many centuries the term *fiddle* has been generic and could be used for any stringed instrument played with a bow. In this period it could not only cover the rebec (kit), medieval fiddle (still in use on Henry VIII's flagship Mary Rose which sank in 1545), viol, and violin. The sketch of Apollo and the Muses, perhaps by Holbein) from the Coronation celebrations of Anne Boleyn in 1533 includes an instrument which might be a violin but the details are not sufficiently clear. As the violin was well known by the middle of the sixteenth century, the word *fiddle* was even more ambiguous than before, as in *Gammer Gurtons Nedle*, where Diccon says:

In the meane time fellowes, pype upp your fiddles, I saie take them  
And let your freyndes here such mirthe as ye can make them. (2.511–12)

And in *Cambises*, when the king has called for music at a banquet, Ambidexter replies:

They be at hand, sir, with stick and fidle,  
They can play a new daunce called Hey didle didle. (1015–16)

In *Wit and Science* Idleness says,

As for her singing, piping, and fid'ling;  
What unthriftines therin is twid'ling! (379–80)

The greatest musical importance in that play, however, is in the appearance of a consort of viols.

A rubric declares, "*Here the[y] cum in with violes,*" and later Woorship says,

Then let us not stay here muet and mum,  
But tast we thes instrumentes till she cum.

*Here thy[y] sing 'Excedinge Mesure.'* (624–25 + s.d.)

At the end of the play All say "Amen," and so to finish "*Heere cum'th in fowre violes and sing 'Remembreance'; and at the last quere all make cur[t]sye and so goe forthe singing*" (1111 s.d.).

An example of instrumental music being played for pure enjoyment comes in *Cambises*, where a Lord says to a Lady, who is accompanied by her maid:

Lady deer, to king akin, forwith let us proceed  
To trace abroad the beauty fields as erst we had decreed

. . .

The chirping birds whose pleasant tunes therein shall hear record,  
That our great joy we shall it find in field to walk abroad,  
On lute and cittern there to play a heavenly harmony,  
Our ears shall hear, heart to content, our sports to beautify.

. . .

*Heere trace up and down playing.* (881–82, 885–90, 881 *s.d.*)

In the Great Chamber of Gilling Castle, Yorkshire, the painted frieze of c.1580 shows a garden scene where three men play instruments of the violin family and their wives have one lute and two citterns.

Whatever the word *fiddle* may have meant in earlier plays, the violin was certainly intended in *Gordoduc*, when, before each act, a “domme shew” accompanied by music pointed to the “signification” of what was to follow. Each of the five acts begins with an indication of the instruments involved:

[Act I.] First the Musicke of Violenze began to playe, during which came in upon the stage sixe wilde men clothed in leaves. . . . (1–4)

[Act II.] First the Musicke of Cornettes began to playe, during which came in upon the stage a King accompanied with a nombre of his nobilitie and gentlemen. . . . (1–4)

[Act III.] Firste the musicke of flutes began to playe, during which came in upon the stage a company of mourners all clad in blacke, betokening death and sorowe. . . . (1–4) (These “flutes” may have been recorders.)

[Act IV.] First the musicke of Howboies began to plaie, during which there came from under the stage, as though out of hell, three furies — Alecto, Megea, and Ctesiphone — clad in back garmentes sprinkled with bloud and flames, their bodies girt with snakes, their heds spred with serpentes instead of heare. . . . (1–6)

[Act V.] First the drommes and flutes began to sound, during which there came forth upon the stage a company of Hargabusiers and of Armed men all in order of bataille. . . . (1–4) (Transverse flutes are often seen with drums in the visual arts.)

This is real program music, with the instruments carefully selected to suit the mood of each scene. It is only tantalizing that the actual music has not, to our knowledge, survived.

The variety of instruments mentioned in the nine plays cited above gives a good idea of some of the musical sonorities of sixteenth-century England. The sound of plucked strings is represented by the gut-string *lute* and *gittern*, while metal strings give contrast in the *cittern*. Bowed strings can be found in the small *kit* used for dancing, in the larger *fiddle* (of which type we cannot be sure), the consort of *viols* of different sizes, and the *violin*. In Joris Hoefnagel's painting of *A Fair at Bermondsey* (c.1570) there is no doubt that the instruments played for dancing are two violins and two violas. (The Cambridge musician and instrument-maker Benet Pryme left in his 1557 inventory both "vyalles" and "vyolans.")

The only mention of a keybord instument is that of the *organ*, for its use in church. However, John Bale, the author of *Kyng Johan*, would have been thinking of a much more advanced organ than that known to King John in the thirteenth century. Woodwind instruments include not only the highly ambiguous *pipe* but more definitely the *recorder*, *pipe-and-tabor*, (transverse) *flute*, and the raucous *howboie* (shawm). Bagpipes are not mentioned, but they could have been covered by the term *pipe*. The brass families are represented by the wooden *cornett*



with its fingerholes and its trumpet-like mouthpiece, and by the *trumpet* itself, generally for use for royalty and in war. Percussion instruments comprise *drums* for war and for dancing, beside *bells* for various purposes in church.<sup>4</sup>

This is only a small selection of reference to musical instruments in Tudor plays. Not only should other plays be scoured for different instruments and how they fitted into daily life, but good use may also be made of the volumes of *Records of English Drama*. For example, the Cambridge volumes are particularly useful as they bring to life in a vivid way the musical activity in plays performed by students and others in this unique period of English drama.<sup>5</sup>

*This previously unpublished essay on the early Tudor period by Mary Remnant is an addition to her survey of known musical instruments as used in medieval drama (Material Culture and Medieval Drama, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series 25 [Medieval Institute Publications, 1999], 141-94). The author was a highly respected specialist in the history, iconography, and performance of early instruments.*

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<sup>4</sup> Up-to-date and reliable descriptions of these instruments are available in the relevant articles in the on-line edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.

<sup>5</sup> For these volumes, see Alan H. Nelson, ed., *Records of Early English Drama: Cambridge*, 2 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989); for the inventory of Benet Pryme, cited above, see 1:203.